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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000132

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01-23-03

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: Amid bickering, President approves PM's selection of new ministers of non-cabinet rank

Refs: (A) Colombo 90; (B) 01 Colombo 2240

(U) Classified by Charge d'Affaires Lewis Amselem.  
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

11. (C) President Kumaratunga has approved Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's selection of seven new ministers of non-cabinet rank and one new deputy minister (see list contained in Para 5). The January 21 notice of approval came weeks after the PM's nomination of the eight. The nub of the dispute was the office of the president's complaint that some of the portfolios being distributed were redundant, as they were already the responsibility of other government offices. In turn, the government accused the president of delaying her decision in order to annoy the PM, thus adding to cohabitation stresses. In the end, according to contacts, the president -- feeling she had proved her point -- decided to throw in the towel and approve the PM's list.

12. (SBU) At this point, according to our count, the government now has 31 ministers of non-cabinet rank and 10 deputy ministers. Ministers of cabinet rank number 127. (Note: These numbers are constantly fluctuating, with the PM moving some ministers into his cabinet, while other ministers change portfolios.)  
(Note: Mission has little new information about the possible cabinet reshuffle first mentioned in Ref A.)

13. (C) Of the new ministers, the following names stand out:

-- Keheliya Rambukwella, new Minister of Science and Technology, is considered an outstanding politician. Rambukwella, 45, is from Kandy in central Sri Lanka and is considered very close to the Prime Minister. He is taking a portfolio previously held by Milinda Moragoda, a senior minister who is increasingly focusing on the peace process.

-- Hemakumara Nanayakkara, new Minister of Agricultural Research, is also considered an excellent vote-getter. From Galle in the south, he is considered close to the PM. He received a B.Sc in agriculture from California St. (Fresno). He is 49.

-- Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena, new Minister of Foreign Employment and Welfare, is from Matara District in the south. A banker by profession, he is well-travelled and considered highly intelligent. Abeywardena, 48, is said to be particularly close to Karu Jayasuriya, the deputy leader of the United National Party (UNP), and Minister of Power and Energy.

14. (C) COMMENT: For sure, this was not as intense a cohabitation dust-up as some in the past. That said, the number of ministers in past governments has become a political football of sorts in Sri Lanka. At this time, the UNP government seems inoculated to some extent against charges that it is bloated in terms of ministers. Based on our count, the total of those with ministerial rank in the UNP government is now 68. While the UNP total is getting up there, it still is less than the previous People's Alliance (PA) regime, which had a ministerial-rank retinue of over 70 (40-plus of cabinet rank). (Note: In late 2001, the PA slimmed down its numbers somewhat after reaching a short-lived accord with the radical JVP party.) If the UNP keeps adding ministers, the matter will eventually become a political issue, however. END COMMENT.

15. (U) A list of the new ministers of non-cabinet rank and the new deputy minister follows:

Begin text:

-- Lakshman Yapa Abeywardene, Foreign Employment, Welfare Minister

-- Ranjith Madduma Bandara, Tourism Development Minister  
-- D.M. Bandaranaike, Paddy Cultivation Development Minister

-- Lucky Jayawardena, Deeds for Lands Minister  
-- Hemakumara Nanayakkara, Agricultural Research  
Minister  
-- Keheliya Rambukwella, Science and Technology Minister  
-- Sarathchandra Rajakaruna, Disaster Management  
Minister  
-- Jayasundara Wijekoon, Deputy Minister for Commerce  
and Consumer Affairs

End text.

16. (U) Minimize considered.

AMSELEM